

NCA
VOC FAR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER 5-6256
JOHN ROBERTS/KOLWEZI, ZAIRE

NOVEMBER 13, 1978

BENGUELA RAILWAY

ANNCR:

THE IMPROVEMENT IN RELATIONS BETWEEN ZAIRE AND ANGOLA RESULTED IN THE REOPENING RECENTLY OF A RAILWAY BRIDGE LINKING THE TWO COUNTRIES. VOA'S WEST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT JOHN ROBERTS, WAS IN SOUTHERN ZAIRE AT THE TIME AND HE HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM THE MINING CAPITAL OF KOLWEZI.

VOICE:

THERE WAS MUCH LOCAL EXCITEMENT HERE WHEN THE OFFICIAL TRAIN BEARING ZAIREAN OFFICIALS PASSED THROUGH THE CITY ON ITS WAY TO THE BRIDGE AT THE BORDER TOWN OF DILOLO FOR THE OPENING CEREMONIES. AFTER DILOLO THE RAILWAY CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER FIFTEEN HUNDRED KILOMETERS TO BENGUELA AND LOBITO ON ANGOLA'S ATLANTIC COAST.

BEFORE THE RAIL LINE WAS CUT BY ANGOLA'S CIVIL WAR THREE YEARS AGO, MUCH OF THE COPPER FROM KOLWEZI WENT TO MARKET BY THIS ROUTE, AND SHABA PROVINCE RECEIVED BASIC GOODS SUCH AS FUEL, FLOUR AND OTHER COMMODITIES THE SAME WAY. RESUMED TRAFFIC ON THIS LINE WOULD HELP REVITALIZE THE ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED SHABA PROVINCE, AND ESPECIALLY KOLWEZI, WHICH IS STRUGGLING TO RECOVER FROM A REBEL ATTACK LAST MAY. HOWEVER, THERE IS STRONG DOUBT HERE THAT THE LINE IS ACTUALLY GOING TO BEGIN FUNCTIONING ANY TIME IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

OVER A WEEK AGO OFFICIALS FROM ANGOLA, ZAIRE AND ZAMBIA, WHICH ALSO USES THE LINE, TOOK PART IN COLORFUL CEREMONIES MARKING THE OPENING OF THE BRIDGE. THERE WERE SPEECHES ALL AROUND, BANDS PLAYED AND TWO TRAINS WERE SYMBOLICALLY SHUTTLED

BETWEEN DILOLO AND THE FIRST STOP ON THE ANGOLAN SIDE, THE TOWN OF TEXIERA DE SOUZA.

BUT IT'S NOT AT ALL CLEAR JUST WHEN ACTUAL RAIL TRAFFIC IS TO BEGIN. AND THERE IS CONTINUING UNCERTAINTY OVER WHETHER THE ANGOLAN PART OF THE LINE CAN BE KEPT FREE FROM ATTACKS BY UNITA GUERRILLAS LED BY JONAS SAVIMBI WHO HAS REMAINED ACTIVE EVER SINCE THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR. SAVIMBI HAS BEEN QUOTED AS SAYING THAT THERE WILL BE NO RESUMPTION OF COMMERCIAL TRAFFIC ON THE BENGUELA RAILWAY UNLESS HE SAYS SO. AND THERE HAVE BEEN UNCONFIRMED REPORTS OF CONTINUED GUERRILLA ATTACKS ON THE LINE DESPITE A HEAVY GUARD MOUNTED BY CUBAN SOLDIERS. HOWEVER, A SPOKESMAN FOR THE MOSTLY BRITISH-OWNED RAIL COMPANY IN LONDON WAS QUOTED AS SAYING THAT THE ATTACKS ARE MINOR, AND IT IS FELT THAT SAVIMBI IS NOT INTERESTED IN DESTROYING THE LINE.

DURING THE DILOLO BRIDGE CEREMONIES, THE ANGOLAN MINISTER OF TRANSPORTATION REPORTEDLY MADE NO ATTEMPT TO HIDE THE FACT THAT ANGOLA STILL HAS INTERNAL PROBLEMS. BUT HE PLEDGED THAT ANGOLA WILL DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO MAINTAIN THE SECURITY OF THE LINE.

HERE IN KOLWEZI A LONG TIME RESIDENT TOLD VOA THAT IF THE LINE REALLY BEGINS TO FUNCTION IT COULD BE THE SALVATION OF THE CITY, BUT HE SAID THERE IS WIDE-SPREAD DOUBT THAT THE ANGOLAN SIDE OF THE LINE IS SECURE. ANOTHER SOURCE TOLD VOA THAT HE WOULD NOT LIKE TO BE ON THE FIRST TRAIN THAT TRIES TO MAKE THE ENTIRE DISTANCE AND STILL ANOTHER SOURCE SAID, "LET'S KEEP THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE: THEY'VE OPENED A BRIDGE, BUT THEY'VE NOT YET OPENED A RAILWAY LINE."

COMMERCIAL TRAFFIC IS NOT EXPECTED TO GET UNDERWAY UNTIL ANGOLA AND ZAIRE REPRESENTATIVES HAVE MET TO WORK OUT TARIFFS, SCHEDULES AND OTHER OPERATING QUESTIONS. THIS MEETING

REPORTEDLY WAS TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN LOBITO, BUT INFORMATION SO FAR IS SCARCE ON THE NEXT STEPS TO PUT THE LINE INTO ACTUAL OPERATION.

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